

Clashing Expectations: Imaginaries of Evil and the Fault Lines of Change

Symposium held at the occasion of Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps' PhD defense

Utrecht University, 15 January, 15.30-18.00, Drift 21, Sweelinckzaal

Registration: Jeannette Boere, a.c.m.boere@uu.nl



Youths in a church in Lusaka, praying against the forces of evil (photo by Johanneke Kroesbergen)

In the past decade, the Devil and his human agents have become a key topic in Southern African churches. To name but a few examples, in the DR Congo the increase in the accusations of children as witches, and their subsequent 'healing' in churches has received consideration from the scholarly world as well as from non-governmental organizations; more recently, in Malawi and Mozambique, a panic surrounding satanic 'blood suckers' has drawn the attention from international media; and in Zambia fears concerning Satanism affect schools, churches and the public opinion in general.

Many of these narratives are influenced by traditional beliefs in witchcraft and possession, and transformed by the Christian demonization of the spirit world. In contemporary spiritual warfare theology, witches, spirits, blood suckers and Satanists are the enemy in a global battle between God and the Devil. Narratives about these phenomena are not just interesting from a theological perspective, but also because they show something about the fears and anxieties of ordinary Africans.

A common feature of these narratives is that they address the fault lines of societal change, as different authors have shown. Peter Geschiere has coined the term 'the modernity of witchcraft' in this regard. In contemporary imaginaries of evil all of these elements of a dreamed-

for modern condition are questioned. In Zambia, medical facilities, infrastructure and education were supposed to usher in the anticipated conditions of modernity, but in testimonies of ex-Satanists these very places are presented as threats to a healthy, prosperous, Christian life. In Nigeria, Misty Bastian writes, vestiges of modernity like university campuses are perceived as sites where cults that perform blood sacrifices are active. Jean and John Comaroff show how narratives about zombies in South Africa exhibit surprising analogies with neo-liberal capitalist thought. In narratives that spread across Africa, modern electronic devices like cell phones are connected to spiritual harm. Churches, as authors like Birgit Meyer and Ruth Marshall have shown, are places where these narratives are mediated. At the same time, accusations of involvement with the powers of evil make churches often also the focal point of the narratives. The gap between expectations of modernity and its lived reality is not the only disparity reflected in imaginaries of evil. Other expectations are equally hard to meet, such as the expectations set for what it means to be a real man or a true woman in a hierarchical society.

More than anything else, contemporary narratives about blood suckers, witches, Satanists, zombies and the like show that the world of young, urban, African Christians is an uncertain world, in which dreams are shattered and in which expectations clash along the fault lines of societal change. This symposium will focus on imaginaries of evil in the sub-Saharan context. Are clashing expectations a factor in the existence of witch camps in Ghana, described by Elias Bongmba et al.? Which expectations clash in different African contexts; and, beyond the continent, in the African diaspora? Are these clashes accompanied by narratives about evil as well? How are the gaps between expectations and lived reality – the fault lines of change in society – sealed, or, in the words of Filip de Boeck, sutured? How can theologians and partner organizations in the West respond to these ideas? This symposium explores how imaginaries of evil develop together with the fault lines of change, and encourages anthropological as well as theological reflections on these topics. The speakers at this symposium are Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps, Elias Bongmba and Filip de Boeck. Their contributions will be discussed by a roundtable panel including Rijk van Dijk (African Studies Centre, Leiden) Peter-Ben Smit (VU Amsterdam), and Annalisa Buttici (to be confirmed).

Chair:

Birgit Meyer (UU)

Program:

15.30 Welcome – Birgit Meyer

15.40 Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps – Zambian narratives about Satanism and the expectations of modernity

16.10 Elias Bongmba – Alternatives to violence and exile: Women and witchcraft in Africa

16.40 Coffee break

16.50 Filip de Boeck – The evil of proximity: Perils of living together in Congo's urban contexts

17.20 Roundtable – Rijk van Dijk, Peter-Ben Smit, Annalisa Buttici (to be confirmed)

17.55 Concluding words – Birgit Meyer

18.00 Drinks

Do you want to attend? Register by sending an email to Jeannette Boere, a.c.m.boere@uu.nl.

Wilt u bij het symposium aanwezig zijn? Stuur dan een mail naar Jeannette Boere, a.c.m.boere@uu.nl.

Abstracts:

Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps – Zambian narratives about Satanism and the expectations of modernity

In 1999, James Ferguson wrote *Expectations of Modernity* about the experiences and beliefs about the future of mineworkers on the Zambian Copperbelt. A long period of economic decline crushed the hopes of these mineworkers to become part of the modern world order, and they felt left behind. Today, the situation in Zambia is different. For the past ten years, Zambia has been one of the world's fastest growing economies. That said, poverty is still widespread, with 60% of the population not having adequate income to meet their basic food requirements in 2010, especially in rural areas (CIA World Factbook 2015). The expectations of a new, modern life that Ferguson describes are still current, as are disappointments when these expectations do not come true. In my presentation I will show how an ambiguous relation to modernity is reflected in testimonies given by young adults who claim to have been involved in Satanism before being delivered and becoming born again Christians.

Elias Kifon Bongmba (Rice University, Houston) – Alternatives to violence and exile: Women and witchcraft in Africa

Witchcraft beliefs which have survived religious, political, and technological developments in many African contexts disproportionately affect women, especially in the most punitive actions taken against alleged witches, such as physical violence, and exile. Challenges in health care and fears fostered by economic difficulties in addition to sheer gender biases have been driving forces behind the accusation of women for practicing witchcraft. Drawing from research conducted in Cameroon and Ghana, I will discuss the preference for and use of violence and exile to sanction women for allegedly practicing witchcraft. I will analyze perspectives offered by progressive voices and political leaders on the prospects dismantling witches' camps in Northern Ghana.

Filip de Boeck (KU Leuven) - The evil of proximity: Perils of living together in Congo's urban contexts

Abstract to follow.